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AUTHOR Walker, Evangeline M. L.
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ABSTRACT

Observations and discussions relating to the role value presuppositions have in determining the "facts" upon which children are judged, learning situations structured, and relationships, in general, established are provided. The assumptions or presuppositions are: (1) the assumption that young children necessarily have a short attention span; (2) the assumption that "giving" children language is always a good thing; (3) the assumption that maximum intervention is educationally sound; (4) the assumption that we are neither out-or-our-minds nor out-of-our-bodies; and (5) the assumption that we recognize that we are a violent society. It is concluded that to use observation affectively, an educator must be prepared to continually reassess his own system of values. (DB)

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EFFECTIVE OBSERVATION FOR EDUCATORS

By

Evangeline M.L. Walker

The lesson for progressive education is that it requires in an urgent degree, a degree more pressing than was incumbent upon former innovators, a philosophy of education based upon a philosophy of experience.

John Dewey: Experience and Education

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While a group of Early Childhood Education students and myself have been observing young children in the wide variety of situations over the past four months we have been greatly impressed by the magnitude of one factor in these observations. The various interpretations of the same situation by observers did not differ in random or trivial ways, but in definite manners, and to the extent that completely opposing conclusions were often drawn. Prolonged discussion of the differences always disclosed the value systems of the observers, and it became obvious how beneficial or detrimental an educator's values are depending upon whether they are consciously apprehended (and therefore criticized) or comparatively unexamined. This paper will be an attempt to demonstrate on the basis of concrete examples taken from our observations and discussion how crucial a role value presuppositions have in determining the 'facts' upon which children are judged, learning situations structured, and relationships in general established.

The observations and discussions will be presented under definite headings representing the assumptions or presuppositions which were most commonly found to be associated with them.

1. The assumption that young children necessarily have a short attention span

One of the reactions that has arisen innumerable times has been one of surprise at the long attention span and persistence of the young child. We seem to have become conditioned to refer to the child's attention span in terms of seconds--perhaps by the fact that for the most part we have been observing children coping with adult-appointed-tasks rather than with self-initiated activities. It is of interest to note that there were occasions in a day centre when children were 'encouraged' to change activities because "they had been at one too long". One wonders if, in a few years' time, these same children will be described as "lacking persistence". Perhaps by making children 'busy' we are effectively depriving them from deeply-involved thinking.

A child's real zest and enthusiasm for learning can indeed be overwhelming for those of us who have long since given up self-motivated learning for being taught, thus denying ourselves the chance of continuing, life-long education. It was not insignificant that one of the student teachers was heard to comment wrily: "Adults seem to have lost the ability to become involved." Apart from the occasional correspondence of the child's idea with our own, it will always be the case that external direction will create the extremely short attention span, and we can never assume it to be inherent in childhood unless we have

carefully assessed the interest of the activity from the child's point of view.

Our assumption that children have short attention spans is often due to the fact that we also assume that we really understood something of children's play. Yet an analysis of 1,300 studies of behaviour development of children aged three through five fonnd play to have been the topic of very little investigation during the last ten years.[1] The fact of a general misunderstanding of the nature of play was particularly brought to my attention through the comments of a teacher when she was asked to try to recall the play of a child who presented her with problems. She proceeded to describe the child's behaviour during a card-matching game devised by herself with very definite aims of her own in mind.

It seems that for too long educators have been labouring under the admonition to "Train up a child in the way he should go".[2] When we return to the Hebrew we find that a more exact and certainly happier translation is: "Educate a child in the way that is his own."[3]

By making an effort we can begin to more fully understand that "wide ranging and satisfying play is a means of learning, a powerful stimulus to learning and a way to free learning from distortion by the emotions."[4]

We know that creativity is naturally expressed in play and is enhanced by opportunities for imaginative play. Rated

playfulness relates positively to divergent thinking--which is desirable at the early stages of problem solving. Planned minimal intervention in children's play can strongly elevate the maturity of play and hence elevate its beneficial cognitive effect.[5]

Maybe our real problem lies in the fact that we educators are seldom playful adults, and regard education as too serious a business, particularly as we belong to one of the social groups under the greatest pressure to change. A playful person, whether he is a politician, artist, or scientist, can play with his ideas--he is not ashamed or afraid to speculate freely. He can abandon ideas or develop good ones without the inhibition of a sense of overwhelming seriousness; playfulness is a way of life involving the simultaneous interplay of innovation and systematic thought and activity. Yet we found a nursery room divided into a "creative side" and a "non-creative side".

Current research is suggesting that an effective educator can "stimulate childrens activities by skillfully arranging play materials and by helping children develop their self-initiated play."[6] To do this the teacher cannot have fixed ideas about the way toys and other materials can be used; she herself views them with a playful eye.

This does not mean that the educator should be trying to beguile or seduce a child into a certain type of playing,

or regarding herself as an entertainer. Such a role is unnecessarily exhausting. We would expect the playful educator to regard at least some of her daily work as pleasure rather than duty, sharing ideas and findings that genuinely interest her rather than feeling that there are certain facts she should impart.

2. The assumption that 'giving' children language is always a good thing

An increased understanding of the intimate connection between language and intellectual development has often led us to exert strange pressures on children. Our attempts to encourage them to talk too often present them with misinformation, and worse still, dull their curiosity.

On one occasion, when a five year old was deeply involved in his play with a plastic boat, a teacher, to encourage him to verbalize his experience, asked him, "What's that?" Disgusted by such an unnecessary, boring, restrictive question, the child simply turned on his heel and left the water tub--but his face told the story. Not only had Glen's abilities been underestimated, and that's always a demoralizing experience, but his known drive to learn had been curbed. Possibly the seeds of alienation had been sown, since he had easily detected (although he could not of course verbalize this) that the teacher's interest was not at all in him and his play, but in his ability to measure up to an arbitrary standard of language

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acquisition. The message to him was something like this: keep your real interests to yourself when you are in school, or the enjoyment of them will be invalidated.

A glance at the literature and at a few nurseries and daycare centres reveals that the uncriticized preoccupation with language acquisition is widespread. For example, educators often devise extremely unnatural tasks intended to teach children to learn the use of groups of words, such as 'square', 'triangle', and 'circle'. The insistence on promoting the language acquisition without due regard for factors like the child's ability and interest often leads to unnecessary problems and frustrations for all concerned. The instructions are found to be too complex, for example, and simplification is required if the completion of the activity is still insisted upon. With simplification too often goes the tendency to distort and misinform. This was illustrated for us by some adults who were becoming frustrated in their attempts to show children how to make a circle from a square. The simplified instruction--"cut the corners off the square"--led to confusion through its ambiguity. By following that instruction a number of different results, including another square and a hexagon, were obtained, none of which was a circle. If the question, "Why do we value the acquisition of these particular words at this particular stage so much?" had been asked, perhaps a great deal of

confusion and pointless activity would have been avoided.

This unnecessary pressurizing to learn words is but one aspect of the ironic tendency of our school system to wish to extend childhood to as much as twenty-five years and more on the one hand, and yet to invalidate the experience of real children by overlaying it with unnecessary and artificial, adult-oriented activities. Again we return to the tragedy of our undervaluing of rich, satisfying, child-selected play activities.

This tragedy is understandable as a result of the way people think in a society dedicated to technological production methods. The central point of this type of production is that if you feed in the correct content you are guaranteed a certain kind of product. This is as true of the use of a computer as of the production of an automobile. We have been aware of the considerable use of production and computer language in educational discussion--words like 'input', 'output', 'product', 'efficiency', and so on. We only too early become victims of the assumption that production methods are appropriate to useful learning--feed in the right content, the language of hexagons, squares and triangles, for example, and out will come the product, namely, a person conversant with a certain area of geometry.

This was never better illustrated than in the compensatory "stress-teaching" programme devised by Bereiter, Engelman, and Osborn at the University of Illinois, to

speed the 'progress' of disadvantaged children. In this programme the 4 year old child is allowed no rest time, outdoor playtime, or toys, but is subjected to 20-30 minute periods of 'pattern drills' in language, arithmetic and reading. As Helen Beck points out, the name itself should make us suspicious; stress creates resistance, breakdown and a tendency to withdraw--and all this to a child who may already be coping with much pressure.[7] It may have been a surprise to most of us that Piaget, such a renowned cognitive theorist, said that 'thinking' and 'feeling' belong together and that we need to consider both in assessing a good learning environment.[8]

As previously stated, play is found to be probably the most powerful stimulant to cognitive development in the early years. For example, it is the direct experience of handling objects that promotes an increase in the number of unusual and interesting ways of using them. Therefore, by denying the disadvantaged child (possibly already experiencing difficulty in playing effectively, with a related poor distinction of reality from fantasy)[9] the opportunity to extend his play, we are, in fact, depriving him of the chance to develop cognitive skills, whatever his facility may be, for example, in 'barking' roughly the correct words in roughly the correct situations. In addition, he will be deprived of the opportunity to develop creativity which will later be so necessary to transform his life-situation.

3. The assumption that maximum intervention is educationally sound

This assumption has already been twice alluded to. It might also be expressed as the belief that there is no such thing as over concern.

Educators often feel a continual obligation to direct a child, to make sure he knows certain facts, to stop his involvment in certain activities, for fear that things will get 'out of control'. Planned minimal intervention seems a far cry. And even minimal intervention presents problems.

We observed numerous thoughtless and unnecessary interventions stemming from uncriticized personal prejudices--like the fear of a mess, and the unreasonable desire for instant perfection--as in the following example. In one situation not only did the children lose interest in their painting but in their teacher as well, because of her constant, inappropriate reminders to wipe their brushes on the side of the pot before putting them on paper. Their involvment with their own self-appointed task was nullified, implying to the children that their ideas, interests and skills are of no value; that to rely on others is preferable. There is a clear message for such children about painting: it is not as important as brush wiping! It is a means of keeping children busy and the phase will soon pass. And pass it does! One wonders how many educators (or any other adult in our

society for that matter) really appreciates the value of the artistic expression of truth as opposed to the factual expression. How many adults explore colours alongside children? (Not to be confused with giving children models to copy!) I remember once enjoying painting in a nursery school; I thought that nobody was paying any attention, After a while a boy of five, who had never to my knowledge selected a painting activity, came up to the easel exclaiming, "But you can't paint!"

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because you're a teacher," came back the reply, "and teachers don't paint. The teacher in my other school didn't paint."

"Perhaps that was because she didn't enjoy painting, but I do, you see."

After watching for a while, John busied himself painting, and did so occasionally during the rest of the year.

I am not for one instant suggesting that all teachers rush into their classrooms and paint. Perhaps they could start by asking themselves why they don't have an art form to call their own (if they don't). Or if they have one, why they feel they cannot share it with children.

Anyway, what does happen to a drip of paint? One of the most dramatic paintings I have ever seen executed by a four year old, was entirely the result of dripping paint

of a single colour from the brush onto the paper on the easel.

Many of us assume that all school furniture and equipment has a 'proper' place and a 'proper' function. If a child has a different idea we may find ourselves thoughtlessly negating it. We saw a child draw up a chair to play with water in comfort. He then went to find another toy and returned to find the chair removed to the other side of the room--its proper place. This incident reminded me of an occasion when I worked in a soft drink factory. We workers were obliged to stand at a conveyor belt all day when we could easily have sat. Many of the older women were complaining of severe leg pains. I found a selection of old benches on which we sat at our work until our coffee break. We returned to find our benches had been removed--without trace. What strange and quietly violent forces are at work amongst us!

We saw a rolling pin removed from a child "because it was for rolling out dough, not for banging with". We saw a boy (who had previously noted that there was no provision for water play that day) "removed" from putting his hands in the fish tank and who, without explanation, was sent to get his hat and coat to play outside. Through thoughtless intervention we can see how often children's solutions to problems are invalidated and they themselves rejected because of their creativity. So the message to the child becomes: Don't use your initiative, let someone

else solve your problems.

A further example is of a girl who stopped painting after being reprimanded for painting the easel. Having observed her carefully we realized that the child was trying to copy the painters in the yard outside. Perhaps the message she received was: don't be inspired by anyone outside the school. Teacher will tell you everything that is important.

It might seem that I have dismissed these last examples as being clear-cut cases where teachers should not have intervened. Whilst I do believe that we tend to interfere with children too much and seldom regard them with real respect--the sort of respect we show an adult whose opinions we value--I am also well aware that it is equally unwise for the teacher to let the children 'do as they please'. Children feel safer to live and explore if they know someone is protecting them from a situation in which they might get badly hurt. And getting hurt may mean incurring someone's wrath. What rules we have should be minimal but carefully defined so as to be freed from arbitrary personal prejudices, and made obvious to all. The reign of a tyrant is characterized by nebulous rules--anything might suddenly be regarded as a crime and a punishable offense.

In our examples the teacher may have wanted the

child to cease banging the rolling pin because the noise was too much for her to bear at close quarters, and could simply have told the child this. In this way she would have been very honest about her reactions and the child would have known immediately where she stood in relation to his actions. His experience and ideas would not have been so devastatingly invalidated. (Of course, there is nothing worse than a teacher with a permanent headache as the excuse for stopping a variety of activities!)

Similarly the teacher might have felt it wise to explain that fish do not appreciate being swished around and suggested that the boy might like to help her prepare a bowl of water to play with. The child who wanted to copy the painters outside could have been offered a large brush and bucket of water to "paint" something like a tiled bathroom wall or a large strip of paper fixed to the wall. As to brush-wiping--of course there might come a time when the child experiences unbearable frustration through the lack of this simple technique. The sensitive teacher, perceiving this point, might courteously make a suggestion.

But even these alternative approaches to minimal intervention need further reflection as to the value systems they perpetuate. For instance, would it have been kind to the fish to allow the boy to find out for himself what

happens to fish when they are subjected to being swished around too much? Was the teacher short of vitamin B_1 or magnesium in her diet, thus making her more sensitive to noise?[10] Should we have easels or floors in schools that can't take a bit of paint? And we could go on and on . . .

In several of our observations we found ourselves expressing concern that a child wasn't really involved and interested in what he was 'meant' to be 'playing' with. Instead the child was gazing around, perhaps watching other children, perhaps doing nothing. "Shouldn't someone intervene and help him to concentrate on the job in hand?" we asked. Why? Why does he make us feel uncomfortable? Do we have at the back of our minds the saying that the devil finds work for idle hands to do? Why do we find ourselves overbusy, exhausted, entertaining children while life races by us? These were some of the questions we raised.

John Holt has noticed that even in the schools in Leicestershire County in England, famous for the exciting learning environments they provide for children, there is the pressure to 'get on with it'[11]--a pressure militating against the philosopher, dreamer or poet. By denying children the chance to do 'nothing' we may be in fact denying them the chance to do a very definite 'something', and certainly we are implying by our intervention that the dreamer is not capable by himself of ever finding his true work.

How hard we find it to value independence in children. We noticed a mother on a bus insisting that her son (about 6 years) would lose his ticket. Finally the child gave it to her with great remonstrations. Unable to bear his distress, the mother returned the ticket as they were about to leave the bus, and then angrily hurried ahead of him. The whimpering child unsuccessfully tried to catch up. The mother obviously had some grounds for anxiety but at the same time she was not allowing the child to use and test his abilities. Even when he was finally conceded a small degree of responsibility he was then rejected for it by means of her hurrying away. Again the message to the child would have been: to be accepted rely on other people.

Dr. D.W. Winnicott says: "Good teaching demands of the teacher a toleration of the frustrations to his or her spontaneity in giving."[12] Perhaps this ability is what makes A.S. Neill seem so helpful and sustaining to so many children. They don't have to worry about him--what he thinks, if he'll be disappointed, what he wants--because he values the children for what they are in themselves. He has faith in them but he doesn't need them and he doesn't need them to need him--he regards them with "benign indifference"--and so the children are free to grow and learn.[13] Unfortunately most circumstances reveal the children we know to "have backs bowed and knees buckling beneath the weight of too much adult concern, even kindly

concern, perhaps especially kindly concern, too much worry, too much fear, too much hope. Everything the children say and do is a sign--are they going in the right direction? Or the wrong? Are we doing the right thing? Everything becomes too big a deal."[14]

4. The assumption that we are neither out-of-our-minds nor out-of-our-bodies

Children's play has also taught us how impoverished are our senses. We noticed children enjoying the feel of things so often but attributed it to 'mere' childish behaviour. One evening we sat at my home and were all presented with a potato. After 'getting to know' our own potato we introduced it to the next person and then to a small group. Finally we gathered in a large group, collected the potatoes into a pot and, with our eyes shut, passed it around until everyone had felt out their original potato. The comments that followed what turned out to be an exhilarating experience went something as follows:

"Wow, I never knew potatoes were all so different!"

"I never thought I would really find my potato again!"

"No wonder children enjoy touching things!"

Then someone suggested that we see if we could recognize another's face by touch. We tried. Something unexpected happened. There was a great deal of giggling and horseplay. Finally, we discussed what had occurred. To our surprise we found that without exception we were recounting

intimate experiences, or thoughts that frightened us, such as being in the dark, or being attacked. We were puzzled. Then we went on to reflect on things said to children, like:

"Don't go out in the rain, you'll catch cold."

"Wear your shoes, or you'll hurt your feet."

"Wear your shoes, it isn't 'nice' to go barefoot."

"Tom, don't touch Billy, it's naughty." (Although it's OK if the touching can be labelled fighting.)

"Eat your food with your knife and fork."

"We'll only have wet sand in the Nursery, so you won't get sand all over you."

And so the child matures, and "he loses touch. He builds a bubble around himself about 18 inches from his skin. When another person enters the bubble, except in very carefully regulated circumstances, he considers it an attack and retreats or stages his own subtle counter attack. He learns that everybody has a bubble just like his and he survives nicely in his own personal space."[15]

Is this what had happened to us?

We began to realize that in many respects we had lost touch with ourselves, with the result that we were often busily engaged in helping children do the same thing by negating their feelings and experiences--we were involved in little acts of violence.

5. The assumption that we recognize that we are a violent society.

Our special effort to become more aware of the violence in and around us was initiated by the failure of one of our number to categorize a child's anger and violence towards another as a form of social relationship. It was thus implied either that a) anger, violence and aggression don't exist in social relationships or are unimportant, or, b) that she considered them to be such an unacceptable form of relationship that they should not be mentioned in the context of relationship.

If, as in a), we assume that violence does not exist in relationship or is unimportant, we are in agreement with the male population of the US who are represented by 1,374 men selected for a study conducted by the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research.[16] The group was asked if certain actions were violent in themselves. The vast majority of participants listed as violent only acts against property--the violation of people and their rights received little mention!

There seems to be every reason to include the mutilation of a persons sensitivity and self-worth under the concept of violence. Indeed, it could be argued that violence against the quality of experience is the most subtle and intense kind, and most far-reaching in its effect. Through reflection and discussion we became aware

that many aspects of relationship are in fact violent. A sample is as follows:

1) A group of adults is laughing <u>at</u> a child, not with him.

2) Scott makes up a song which pleases him. A teacher's comment about her observations of him was that perhaps he was then ready to learn a <u>real</u> song. Apparently the song he created was not worthy of the label 'real'.

The next few examples are taken from the ninth month of life of two girls.

3) The photographer tried to 'coax' a different type of smile from the child--her most natural one was too large!

4) At a regular medical checkup, at the painful point when the hip joints are tested, the small baby cried out in distress. The doctor asked, "Does she have a temper?"

5) The two babies were sitting opposite each other, quietly enjoying themselves. A new adult arrived and immediately picked up one baby, leaving the other crying bitterly at the loss of her companion.

In all these examples a child's feelings were not considered and thus were invalidated.(Incidentally, I wonder if we need to do a lot more careful observation of so-called 'parallel play'). As I have already suggested, experiences like this lead eventually to adults

who have lost touch with themselves, who believe their own thoughts and feelings are worthless, and who find themselves estranged not only from themselves but from other people. What could be more tragic?

Several of us did in fact discover that it is often hard to admit that we are angry or have violent tendencies. "In her book Teacher, Sylvia Ashton Warner describes how unintrusive, how natural and genuine, the educative process can be when a teacher has come to grips with her own . . . violence . . . and when she has accepted the fact that . . . aggressive topics are also important vehicles for a child's learning . . . in many areas."[17]

We began to look at aggressive relationships or the results of aggression in terms of a learning situation for the child. We noticed, for example, an adult with a disgusted look on her face when a toy was broken through a child's anger. Would her silent communication help the child make reparation for his aggression? Would the child have his faith in himself renewed; that is, would he realize that he need not necessarily be overwhelmed by aggressive forces? Would he be encouraged to believe that aggression can be channelled creatively and constructively? If the teacher's reactions to the child's behaviour had not so overwhelmed her, she might have been able to assist the child in the repair of the toy,

or could later have shown it to the child when it had been repaired. The child would have thus been helped to make reparation for his action, and left with a more positive feeling about himself.

One student commented, "One problem that occurs in the housekeeping centre is that often one child will have an idea as to what he wants done and has a difficult time getting the others to follow." And of course this will continue throughout his life! Yet it did present a problem to us. There always seemed to be a great deal of quarrelling and we found ourselves stepping into these situations perhaps muttering "something has to be done". Of course, if another child was in danger of being physically hurt we should probably intervene. But more often than not perhaps we should precede any action with a reminder to ourselves that the children are simply doing something that we have possibly forgotten or are afraid to do, namely, showing their feelings as they feel them. It is because children can do this that they adjust their relationships so quickly and adroitly, without extended feuds and the pain of repression.

If it is a fact that one cannot have a true and loving relationship with another until one is free enough to be angry with him (and yet we found it difficult to even admit that we have angry feelings), perhaps our

achievement and promotion of harmony in relationships are but shadows of what they could be. It was not insignificant that a student commented to me, "I finally realize that Wendy must value me, because she's bothered to argue with me."

Time and again we caught ourselves using phrases like: "He's acting up . . . and loving the attention he's getting." Upon reflection, however, we invariably found that there were good reasons for the behaviour under consideration--the child had been violated in some way. Why make the immediate judgment of accusation then? Usually, it seems, we have managed over the years to bear the violation of our own rights and freedoms, and the invalidation of our precious moments, by subtly transforming our attitudes from perplexity or outrage to acceptance. We have achieved this by the explanation that the violation was 'really' good, since it was 'necessary' training, schooling or general experience. As a consequence, since we 'had to go through it', we do, as a first reaction, rebel against the outrage of others who are <u>not</u> prepared to accept the violation of themselves. Reflection on the unreasonableness of that first reaction can greatly help the observer to view aggression in children not as simply 'bad' and 'wrong', but possibly as the expression of outrage at a real instance of violence towards them.

Conclusion

It will have become clear that the observations and discussions could have been included under different, and perhaps sometimes under all, headings. This is an indication that a reassessment of one value on the basis of reflection on the significance of an observation involves a reassessment of other values. That is, our values to a considerable extent form a system. (The greater the extent to which they do interlock in a consistent system the better, of course, for this lessens the chances of unwittingly confusing our judgements by inconsistent values.) The conclusion is that educators cannot rely on simple, 'neutral facts' for the observations on which their reasoning and action will be based--there are no such 'neutral facts'. What a 'fact' is depends upon what values are held. Was the child intolerably rude and aggressive or courageously outspoken against a violation of his rights as a human being? To use observation effectively, an educator must be prepared to continually reassess his own system of values--a difficult and often painful process. However, it is essential in order that 'progress' in education will tryly be in service to the best of interests of the individual.

Evangeline M.L.Walker

Department of Early Childhood Education,
Fanshawe Community College,
London, Ontario.

NOTES

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5. Butler, loc. cit.

6. Ibid.

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9. Butler, loc.cit.

10. Adelle Davis, Let's Eat Right to Keep Fit (New York: Signet Books, New American Library Inc., 1970), pp. 97, 170, 174.

11. John Holt, Freedom and Beyond (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co. Inc., 1972), p. 64.

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13. Holt, op. cit., p. 22.

14. Ibid.

15. J. Schrank, Teaching Human Beings (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), p. 10.

16. Ibid., p. 68.

17. Paul Adams, "The Infant, The Family & Society," Children's Rights (London: Panther Books, Granada Publishing Ltd., 1972), p. 93.

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